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OPIUM AND AFGHANISTAN: REASSESSING U.S. COUNTER- NARCOTICS STRATEGY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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Cultivation and production of opium in Afghanistan has skyrocketed since the Taliban was toppled in 2001 such that Afghanistan now supplies 92 percent of the world's illicit opium. The expanding opium trade is threatening to destabilize the Afghan government and turn the conflict-ridden country back into a safe haven for drug traffickers and terrorists. This paper examines the nature of the opium problem in Afghanistan and analyzes the strategy to counter this growing crisis. In analyzing the current counter-narcotics strategy, it points out pitfalls including the counterproductive aspects of opium eradication. Finally, changes to the strategy are proposed which include the following: increasing troop levels and eliminating national restrictions; substantially increasing financial aid; de-emphasizing opium eradication; focusing on long-term alternative livelihoods; aggressively pursuing drug kingpins and corrupt government officials; and exploring the possibility of Afghanistan entering the licit opium market.

OPIUM AND AFGHANISTAN: REASSESSING U.S. COUNTER-NARCOTICS STRATEGY

Either Afghanistan destroys opium or opium will destroy Afghanistan.[1]

—President Hamid Karzai

The above quote illustrates the important link between opium production and the future security of Afghanistan. Opium production in Afghanistan has skyrocketed since the United States (U.S.) military teamed with the Central Intelligence Agency and Afghanistan's Northern Alliance in toppling the Taliban in 2001 such that Afghanistan now supplies 92 percent of the world's illicit opium.[2] This growing opium trade is threatening to destabilize the Afghan government and turn the conflict-ridden country back into a safe haven for drug traffickers and terrorists. Afghan President Karzai calls the opium problem, "the single greatest challenge to the long term security, development, and effective governance of Afghanistan."[3] This paper examines the nature of the opium problem in Afghanistan and analyzes the current strategy to counter this growing crisis. It then points out pitfalls in the U.S. counter-narcotics strategy and recommends changes to the strategy to better address the complex issues associated with the opium trade. To provide a better understanding of the opium problem and strategy challenges, this paper first examines the characteristics of Afghanistan and its agricultural economy.

Background

Afghanistan

The history of Afghanistan reveals a country marred by conflict and lacking in stable self governance. Afghanistan was founded in 1747, but from 1826 until 1919 the country was ruled by the British until it regained its independence. In 1964, Afghanistan's King Zahir established a constitution and implemented democratic reforms. In 1973, a military coup ended the brief period of democracy, and a second coup in 1978 installed a communist regime. The following year, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, only to withdraw in disgrace after 10 years of stiff resistance from the U.S.-backed Mujahideen rebels. The communist regime crumbled in 1992 sparking a civil war between rival Mujahideen factions. By 1998, the Taliban, a hard-line, Islamic-based, Pakistani-sponsored movement emerged in control of most of the country. Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the U.S. joined Afghanistan's Northern Alliance in toppling the Taliban for their role in harboring terrorists including Al-Qaeda's leader Osama Bin Laden.

Although the Taliban was ousted relatively quickly, the country was left in economic ruin and political chaos. In December 2001, a number of prominent Afghans met in Bonn, Germany under United Nations (U.N.) auspices to develop a plan to reestablish the State of Afghanistan including provisions for a new constitution and national elections. As part of that agreement, the United Kingdom (U.K.) was designated the lead country in addressing counter-narcotics issues in Afghanistan. Afghanistan subsequently implemented its new constitution and held national elections. On 7 December 2004, Hamid Karzai was formally sworn in as president of a democratic Afghanistan. Since then, he has struggled to rebuild the country and establish a functioning government.

Although it has been more than five years since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's infrastructure remains devastated, its economy is weak, and the security environment is increasingly unstable. To manage this turmoil, over 40,000 foreign troops still occupy Afghanistan. Of this total, some 32,000 troops from 37 countries make up the North American Treaty Organization (NATO)-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), while approximately 8,000 U.S. troops, mostly special operations forces, operate independently. NATO and U.S. troops continue to face stiff resistance from anti-government elements including a resurgent Taliban which is particularly active in Afghanistan's southern region. The situation continues to deteriorate as 2006 marked the bloodiest year of conflict since U.S. forces originally ousted the Taliban. NATO military officials reported that the number of attacks against coalition forces in Afghanistan more than tripled in 2006 to approximately 5,000 attacks, up from 1,500 in 2005.[4] Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) described the situation this way: "There is no rule of law in most of the southern parts of Afghanistan—the bullets rule."[5]

Complicating efforts to provide governance and stability is the decentralized structure of Afghanistan's government. The country is made up of 34 provinces, 300 districts, and over 30,000 villages.[6] Despite the emergence of democracy, the country never had a strong central government. Village, tribal, and regional leaders tend to have significant influence over the local population. Some of these leaders have their own militias and are referred to as "war-lords." These war-lords often hold high political offices within the government including provincial governorships. Due to the central government's weak nature, President Karzai relies heavily on his war-lord governors to govern Afghanistan.

Geography and climate also create economic challenges which are difficult to overcome. Afghanistan is a landlocked country roughly the size of Texas with mostly rugged terrain, few natural resources, and an arid climate with harsh winters. As one of the poorest countries in the

world, its 31 million residents have an average per capita income of just $800[7] and eighty percent of its rural population lives in poverty.[8] Only 23 percent of Afghans have access to safe drinking water and only 6 percent to electricity.[9] The 2004 U.N. Development Program ranked Afghanistan number 173 of 177 countries using a human development index, with Afghanistan near or at the bottom of virtually every development indicator including nutrition, infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy.[10]

The high rate of return on investment from opium poppy cultivation has driven an agricultural shift in Afghanistan from growing traditional crops to growing opium poppy. Despite the fact that only 12 percent of its land is arable, agriculture is a way of life for 70 percent of Afghans and is the country's primary source of income. [11] During good years, Afghanistan produced enough food to feed its people as well as a surplus for export. Its traditional agricultural products include wheat, corn, barley, rice, cotton, fruit, nuts, and grapes. However, its agricultural economy has suffered considerably from years of violent conflict, drought, and deteriorating infrastructure. In recent years, many poor farmers have turned to opium poppy cultivation to make a living because of the relatively high rate of return on investment compared to traditional crops. Consequently, Afghanistan's largest and fastest cash crop is opium.

Figure 1. Opium Poppy Capsule[12]

Opium

Opium poppy is a hardy, drought-resistant plant that is easily grown in most parts of Afghanistan under a cycle that spreads out the farmer's workload throughout the year. Opium poppy is usually planted between September and December and flowers after approximately three months. The flower's petals then fall away leaving the plant's seed capsule containing an opaque, milky sap know as opium (see Figure 1). Afghan farmers harvest opium between April and July when the plump seed capsules are lanced, allowing the opium sap to ooze out and be collected after it has dried into a black tar-like substance. The opium sap is then harvested for refinement into opiate based products.

Opium is grown legally is some countries for medical purposes, but huge demand in the illicit market coupled with saturation of the licit market is driving Afghanistan to supply illegal opium. In 2004, approximately 523 tons of morphine was produced worldwide from opium for medical purposes.[13] Opium is also refined for use in legal prescription painkillers such as OxyContin and Vicodin.[14] However, Australia and France currently produce about half the world's opium used for medical purposes, with India, Turkey, Spain, and Hungary producing a majority of the rest, which leaves little flexibility for Afghanistan to enter this market. Although some opium is produced legally, most of the world's opium is illegally grown and processed in countries with limited governmental control. Hence, virtually none of Afghanistan's opium poppy harvest is used for licit opiates. Instead, almost all of Afghanistan's opium ends up on the international market as heroin.

Heroin addiction is a global problem, and world-wide demand for heroin is increasingly being met by Afghanistan's farmers and drug traffickers. Heroin is a highly addictive drug and prolonged use can result in a variety of social and health-related problems. Sharing of contaminated heroin needles is a major contributor to the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. According to the U.N. World Drug Report, there are approximately 16 million illicit opiate users worldwide including 11 million heroin users. The primary opiate using countries in the world include: India (3 million users), Russia and Eastern Europe (2.3 million), China (1.7 million), Western Europe (1.6 million), Iran (1.2 million), U.S. (1.2 million), and Pakistan (0.7 million).[15] Afghanistan has approximately 150,000 opium and 50,000 heroin users and consumes just 3.3 percent of its own harvest.[16] Afghanistan's is the source of nearly 90 percent of heroin in Europe and Russia,[17] while approximately 14 percent of heroin in the U.S. comes from Afghanistan, up from seven percent in 2001.[18] According to UNODC, as many as 100,000 people die annually directly or indirectly from abuse of Afghan heroin.[19] Furthermore, UNODC predicts that increasing opium production in Afghanistan will result in an increase in

heroin overdoses worldwide because greater supply traditionally leads to a higher level of heroin purity on the international market.[20]

Afghanistan's Opium Economy

Cultivation and production of opium has significantly increased in Afghanistan since 2001. Afghan farmers have grown opium poppy for generations; however, not until the 1970s did they grow it in significant amounts for export. With the exception of the year 2001, when the Taliban strictly enforced a moratorium on poppy cultivation with such harsh tactics as beheadings, opium poppy cultivation has been steadily increasing for over the past two decades as is shown in Figure 2.[21] Today, poppy cultivation and opium production are at all time highs. According to UNODC, opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan covered an estimated 165,000 hectares during the 2005-2006 growing season, a 59 percent increase from the previous year. UNODC also estimated that opium production in 2006 was 6,100 metric tons, up from 4,100 metric tons in 2005, which makes Afghanistan by far the world's largest producer of opium.

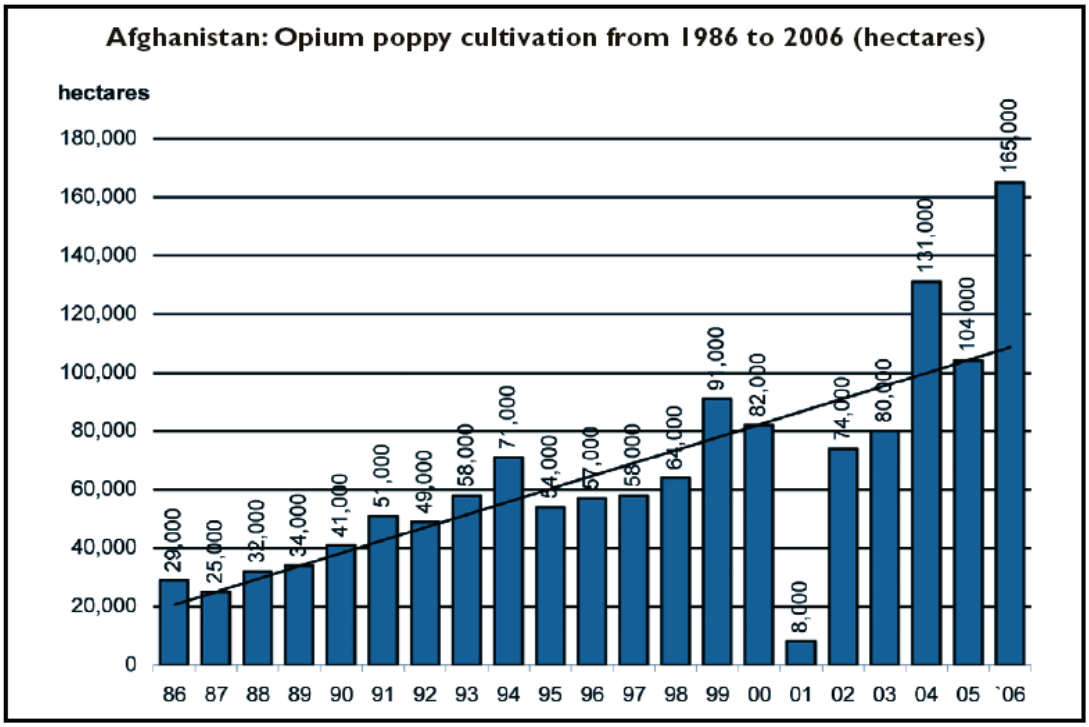

Figure 2. Afghanistan's Opium Poppy Cultivation From 1986 to 2006[22]

Cultivating opium poppy makes great economic sense for the impoverished farmers of Afghanistan. It is the easiest crop to grow and the most profitable. Even though the Karzai government made opium poppy cultivation and trafficking illegal in 2002, many farmers driven

by poverty continue to cultivate opium poppy to provide for their families. Indeed, poverty is the primary reason given by Afghan farmers for choosing to cultivate opium poppy.[23] With a farm gate price of approximately $125 per kg for dry opium,[24] an Afghan farmer can make 17 times more profit growing opium poppy—$4,622 per hectare, compared to only $266 per hectare for wheat.[25] Opium poppy is also drought resistant, easy to transport and store, and unlike many crops, it requires no refrigeration and does not spoil. With Afghanistan's limited irrigation, electricity, roads, and other infrastructure, growing traditional crops can be extremely difficult. In many cases, farmers are simply unable to support their families growing traditional crops, and because most rural farmers are uneducated and illiterate, they have few economically viable alternatives to growing opium poppy.

Afghanistan's economy has evolved such that it is now highly dependent on opium. Although less than four percent of arable land in Afghanistan was used for opium poppy cultivation in 2006, revenue from the harvest brought in over three billion dollars—more than 35 percent of the country's total gross national product (GNP).[26] According to Costa, "Opium poppy cultivation, processing, and transport have become Afghanistan's top employers, its main source of capital, and the principal base of its economy."[27] Today, a record 2.9 million Afghanis from 28 of 34 provinces are involved in opium cultivation in some way, which represents nearly 10 percent of the population.[28] Although Afghanistan's overall economy is being boosted by opium profits, less than 20 percent of the three billion in opium profits actually goes to impoverished farmers, while more than 80 percent goes in the pockets of Afghan's opium traffickers and kingpins and their political connections.[29] Even heftier profits are generated outside of Afghanistan by international drug traffickers and dealers.

Traditionally, processing of Afghan's opium into heroin has been done outside of Afghanistan; however, in an effort to reap more profits internally, Afghan drug kingpins have stepped-up heroin processing within their borders. Heroin processing labs have proliferated in Afghanistan since the late 1990s particularly in the unstable southern region, which further complicates stabilization efforts. With the reemergence of the Taliban and the virtual absence of the rule of law, opium production and heroin processing have dramatically increased, especially in the southern province of Hemland. In 2006, opium production in the province increased over 162 percent and now accounts for 42 percent of Afghan's total opium output.[30] According to UNODC, the opium situation in the southern provinces is "out of control."[31]

Problems with Afghanistan's Opium Economy

While revenues from the opium trade are stimulating the economy, there are significant negative consequences. Two major problems associated with the opium economy are: widespread corruption which is eroding the rule of law; and the link between the opium trade and the resurgence of the Taliban and the insurgency.

Corruption and the Erosion of the Rule of Law

Corruption associated with the opium economy has spread to all levels of the Afghan government from the police to the parliament and is eroding the rule of law. Farmers routinely bribe police and counter-narcotics eradication personnel to turn a blind-eye. Law enforcement personnel are also paid-off by drug traffickers to ignore, or in some cases, protect their movements. Afghan government officials are now believed to be involved in at least 70 percent of opium trafficking, and experts estimate that at least 13 former or present provincial governors are directly involved in the drug trade.[32] Furthermore, up to 25 percent of the 249 elected members of parliament are also suspected of being involved in the drug trade.[33] When referring to Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior, Syed Ikramuddin, Afghan's Minister of Labor, said: "Except for the Minister of Interior himself, all the lower people from the heads of department down are involved in supporting drug smuggling."[34] To illustrate this corruption, in a single raid, nine tons of opium was recovered from the offices of the Governor of Afghan's Helmand Province. While the governor was eventually replaced, no punitive action was taken against him, and he moved on to a high-level position in parliament.[35] This case is not that unusual because corrupt officials are rarely removed from government jobs, but rather simply reassigned.

For many of Afghanistan's war-lords, the opium trade brings money and power. Therefore, several of Afghanistan's powerful war-lords are also top drug-lords. In some cases, these war-lords are the same individuals that cooperated with the U.S in ousting the Taliban in 2001. In some provinces, the war-lords are now promoting the opium industry by bribing government officials and providing protection to farmers and traffickers. Political corruption is so widespread in Afghanistan that it is undermining public institutions, eroding the rule of law, and creating an unstable and volatile situation. Things are so bad that President Karzai himself has stated that, "drugs in Afghanistan are threatening the very existence of the Afghan State."[36]

Resurgent Taliban/Insurgency

The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, particularly in the southern provinces, is also closely linked to the opium industry. The Taliban are using Afghan's opium industry as a source of funds as well as an avenue to gain the allegiance of the Afghan people, particularly

poor rural Afghans discontent with the U.S. and NATO-supported Karzai government. Muhammad Daud, former governor of Helmand Province in making this linkage to the Taliban, stated: "The Taliban have forged an alliance with drug smugglers, providing protection for drug convoys and mounting attacks to keep the government away and the poppy flourishing."[37] For example, an estimated 70 percent of the Taliban's income now comes from protection money and the sale of opium.[38] Furthermore, the situation appears to be getting worse as evidenced by a Kabul Police Anti-Criminal Branch report that stated: "Evidence is growing that the Taliban and their allies are moving beyond taxing the trade to protecting opium shipments, running heroin labs, and even organizing farm output in areas they control."[39]

The Taliban are exploiting the opium industry to garner additional power in Afghanistan. Ann Patterson, Assistant Secretary of State for Narcotics and Law Enforcement, reports that the Taliban are encouraging farmers to cultivate opium poppy and are protecting drug routes and traffickers.[40] British General Richards, ISAF Commander, stated that the violence in southern Afghanistan was inextricably linked to drugs.[41] UNODC reports that the Taliban have distributed leaflets ordering farmers to grow poppy.[42] Further, they are paying Afghan men up to $200 a month to fight along side them against U.S. and NATO troops compared to a mere $70 a month that the average Afghan police officer is paid by the Karzai government.[43]

Further complicating the security situation are that Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters, who routinely operate back and forth between Pakistan and Afghanistan, are being joined by an increasing number of Afghan insurgents opposed to the Karzai government and U.S. and NATO forces. There is strong evidence of a connection between the insurgent's increase and the increase in opium cultivation, and that anti-government elements have leveraged opium money to fund this insurgency.[44] The U.S. Congress is aware of the linkage as Representative Henry Hyde, in a letter to Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, wrote: "We all know the drugs fuel the violence and insurgency."[45] President Karzai best sums up this issue when he stated: "The question of drugs…is one that will determine Afghanistan's future...If we fail, we will fail as a state eventually and we will fall back in the hands of terrorism."[46]

Current Counter-Narcotics Strategy

Shortly after taking office, President Karzai declared a "jihad against poppy," stating that growing opium poppy was against Islam and was destroying Afghanistan.[47] He backed up his strong words by implementing a strict "zero-tolerance" counter-narcotics law making it illegal to traffic any quantity of opium and by introducing the Afghan National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS). The strategy is based on the following four principles: disrupting the drug trade;

strengthening and diversifying legal rural livelihoods; reducing the drug demand and treatment of problem drug users; and developing state institutions at the central and provincial level. These principles are supported by the following eight pillars: public awareness; international and regional cooperation; alternate livelihoods; demand reduction; law enforcement; criminal justice; eradication; and institution building.[48]

President Karzai tasked the central government and provincial governors to support the counter-narcotics strategy. He ordered provincial governors to eradicate opium within their provinces while designating two of his ministries with counter-narcotics responsibilities: the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics and the Ministry of Interior.[49] The Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, established under the guidance of the U.K., is responsible for the policy and coordination of the government's counter-narcotics efforts. The Ministry of Interior, strongly influenced by the U.S., has the lead for implementing counter-narcotics policies. Within Afghan's Ministry of Interior, the Counter-Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) and the Afghan Special Narcotics Force (ASNF) execute these policies. While these organizations are responsible for implementing the central government's counter-narcotics efforts, Afghanistan is reliant on the U.S., U.K., and other countries to provide the funding necessary to support theses efforts.

Working with the U.K. and the Afghan government, the U.S developed its own strategy to counter the opium problem in Afghanistan, which has the following five pillars: alternative livelihoods; elimination and eradication; interdiction; law enforcement and justice reform; and public information (see Figure 3). The Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Defense, and the Department of Justice are the primary organizations involved in carrying out this counter-narcotics strategy.

Figure 3. Five Pillars of the U.S. Counter-Narcotics Strategy[50]

These U.S. organizations are involved in numerous programs and projects to support the counter-narcotics strategy in Afghanistan. USAID is implementing cash-for-work programs, distributing seed and fertilizer to farmers growing alternate crops, improving irrigation and storage facilities, implementing a rural credit program, and supporting business development in targeted areas.[51] The Department of State, Department of Justice, and Department of Defense are all supporting provincial and central governmental poppy elimination and eradications programs. The Department of Defense provides intelligence, planning assistance, and air transportation to Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agents in Afghanistan and is in the process of training Afghan pilots and supplying them with eight MI-17 helicopters.[52] The DEA is leading the effort to build Afghan's capacity to seize drug shipments, destroy heroin labs, confiscate precursor chemicals, and arrest major drug traffickers. The DEA Foreign-Deployed Advisory and Support Teams, on 120-day rotations to Afghanistan, are training Afghan counter-narcotics forces and participating in drug raids and eradication efforts. The State Department is working to improve border security between Afghanistan and its neighbors. The Department of Justice is supporting efforts to increase Afghan's capacity to arrest and prosecute drug traffickers and corrupt officials and help implement new counter-narcotics laws, refurbish courthouses, and train guards. Furthermore, several U.S. agencies are working with Afghan authorities on a public information campaign using posters as well as radio and television spots to convince the Afghan people to reject opium poppy cultivation and trade.

To provide support for these programs and projects, in 2005 the U.S. spent a total of $782 million.[53] Of the $782 million, $532 million was administered by the Department of State and USAID, while the remaining $250 million was administered by the Department of Defense and the DEA.[54] Department of State and USAID expenditures associated with each pillar of the U.S. drug control strategy were as follows: $180 million for alternative livelihoods; $258 million for elimination and eradication; $65 million for interdiction; $24 million for law enforcement and justice reform; and $5 million for public information.[55] The Department of Defense and DEA's funds were focused primarily on elimination and eradication.

While there have been some success stories, the counter-narcotics strategy has been ineffective in curbing opium cultivation and production in Afghanistan. For example, the CNPA, working together with the DEA, was successful in seizing 47.9 metric tons of opium and 5.5 metric tons of heroin in 2005, and the ASNF destroyed 100 metric tons of opium and 30 tons of heroin.[56] Furthermore, while 15,300 hectares, or approximately 10 percent of the opium poppy crop was eradicated by counter-narcotics forces, the overall levels of opium poppy cultivation,

opium production, and heroin processing still dramatically increased in 2006 and are forecasted to be as high if not higher in 2007.[57]

Problems with Current Counter-Narcotics Strategy

My research revealed that the U.S. counter-narcotics strategy has been ineffective for three key reasons. First, Afghanistan lacks the security environment necessary to conduct a successful counter-narcotics strategy. Second, the current emphasis on eradication is counterproductive. Finally, the five-pillared counter-narcotics strategy is not adequately prioritized or resourced. These three areas are now explored in detail.

Lack of Security

The security situation in much of Afghanistan is simply inadequate to carry out an effective counter-narcotics campaign. While some regions of Afghanistan are relatively stable and free of violence, other regions, including the southern provinces, have had marked increases in violence directed at the Karzai government, as well as NATO and U.S. troops. The total number of direct attacks by insurgents increased to 4,542 in 2006 from 1,558 in 2005.[58] In addition the number of roadside bombs more than doubled to 1,677 in 2006 from 783 a year earlier, and suicide bombings increased fivefold to 139.[59] Many of these incidents were related to the eradication campaign.[60]

To counter anti-government elements, NATO and U.S. forces have stepped up the number of kinetic attacks. In last six months of 2006 alone, U.S. forces conducted over 2,000 air strikes killing hundreds of insurgents and Taliban fighters along with many innocent civilians.[61] In June 2006, President Karzai raised concern regarding the security situation and the escalation in violence when he stated: "It is not acceptable that in all this fighting, Afghans are dying. In the past three to for weeks, 500 to 600 Afghans were killed. Even if they are Taliban, they are sons of this land."[62]

Security voids in Afghanistan are being filled by insurgents, criminals, corrupt officials, and terrorists, many of which leverage the opium trade for funding. The Taliban have helped fill this security void by providing Afghan citizens an alternative source of security to the weak central government. While most Afghan citizens were happy to see the Taliban fall, many of them are now disillusioned with U.S. and NATO forces for failing to bring security or improve their quality of life. In addition, many Afghans are upset with U.S. and NATO forces for what they consider excessive collateral damage from the fighting. As a result, more and more Afghans are turning to the Taliban to meet their needs.

The U.S. finds itself in the difficult position of trying to simultaneously fight for security, win the hearts and minds of the people, and dismantle the opium industry. There is great pressure to show progress in addressing the opium crisis because of the widely-held belief that the opium trade is fueling instability and insecurity. Costa recently called for "robust military action by NATO forces to destroy the opium industry in southern Afghanistan," adding that the counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics efforts "must reinforce each other so as to stop the vicious circle of drugs funding terrorists and terrorists protecting drug traffickers" that is "dragging the rest of Afghanistan into a bottomless pit of destruction and despair."[63] Essentially, the pressure for quick results in the "war on drugs" in Afghanistan has driven the U.S. to support a strategy that over-emphasizes eradication as a means of curbing opium production.

Counterproductive Eradication Effort

The U.S.-backed opium poppy eradication efforts have not succeeded in reducing the production of opium and have, in many cases, been counterproductive. The aggressive pursuit of eradication alienated many peasant farmers and resulted in some of them turning against U.S. and NATO forces. The Senlis Council, an international drug-policy think tank, argues that the U.S.-backed eradication effort was "the single biggest reason Afghans turned against the foreigners."[64]

While 98 percent of Afghan opium farmers are ready to stop opium poppy cultivation if access to alternate livelihood is provided, relatively few of them have been given access to realistic alternatives.[65] In addition, the lack of infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems, and storage facilities makes growing alternative crops extremely difficult. Many peasant farmers find themselves trapped by debt and are left with no alternatives but to grow opium poppy.

Efforts to eradicate opium are also fueling resistance from drug traffickers, war-lords, and corrupt officials who are currently profiting from the opium trade. Consequently, some opium farmers and traffickers have teamed with anti-government forces to strengthen the insurgency in Afghanistan. The Taliban have also exploited U.S.-backed eradication efforts to their benefit by providing protection to Afghan farmers and drug traffickers in exchange for their loyalty. The Senlis Council argues that eradication not only ruins small farmers but drives them into the arms of the Taliban who offer loans, protection, and a chance to plant again.[66] Instead of improving the quality of life for Afghan citizens, the U.S.-backed opium eradication efforts may instead be alienating Afghans, strengthening the Taliban, and increasing instability.

Unbalanced Approach

The U.S. five-pillared approach to counter-narcotics addresses the key factors necessary to solve the opium problem in Afghanistan; however, the current strategy disproportionately emphasizes and resources the eradication pillar at the expense of the strategy's other pillars. Anne W. Patterson, Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs recognized this when she stated: "While we agree that we must improve our interdiction capacity, the simple truth is that eradication is much easier."[67] While eradication may seem like a quick and easy fix, it is alienating small farmers while many of the largest drug traffickers, kingpins, and corrupt officials in Afghanistan continue to prosper. With eradication getting most of the attention and resources, the alternative livelihoods, interdiction, law enforcement and justice reform, and public information pillars of the U.S. counter-narcotics strategy have been neglected, resulting in an ineffective counter-narcotics program.

Recommendations

My research has identified six recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the counter-narcotics strategy in Afghanistan. These recommendations were developed based on treating Afghanistan's opium situation as a systemic problem. If implemented piecemeal, these recommendations may be ineffective as the opium industry in Afghanistan will likely adapt to counter the implementation of "cherry-picked" measures. Therefore, all of the following recommendations should be implemented together to maximize the effectiveness of the U.S. counter-narcotics strategy.

Increase Troop Levels and Eliminate National Restrictions

The total number of U.S and NATO troops in Afghanistan should be increased to at least 50,000, an approximate 10,000 increase over the current troop level, to counter the growing number of aggressive anti-government elements particularly in the southern provinces. Robert Hunter of the RAND Corporation says that "40,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan are not enough" and that some provinces have "little or no ISAF presence."[68] These 10,000 additional troops are needed to defeat anti-government forces that have put up stiff resistance and have co-opted support from local Afghans. Increasing troop levels in Afghanistan will help provide needed security in the regions with the highest level of conflict and opium production, which is necessary to implement an effective counter-narcotics strategy.

NATO countries should supply at least half of the 10,000 troop increase, and they need to drop national caveats which limit where and how their troops can be employed. More troops are something that the ISAF Commander has been asking for with lukewarm responses from NATO

countries reluctant to get involved in the fighting. Despite this shortfall, several NATO countries have refused to send more troops and have implemented caveats limiting their forces' participation in actual combat.[69] Due to a lack of troops, the ISAF commander has been essentially forced to abandon portions of southern Afghanistan to Taliban and insurgent forces. In many areas of Hemland Province the Taliban operate freely, and opium cultivation is flourishing. The U.S. should continue to pressure NATO countries to increase troop levels in Afghanistan and eliminate national caveats so adequate manpower is available to improve the security situation in Afghanistan which will, in turn, create an environment more conducive to effective counter-narcotics efforts.

Substantially Increase Financial Aid

The U.S. should increase aid to Afghanistan by more than three-fold to approximately $8 billion per year for at least the next three years to "kick-start" the licit Afghan economy and ensure that the pro-U.S. Karzai government survives. Currently, the Afghan government is not mature enough, nor does it have enough resources to provide proper governance to its people. The U.S. has provided only around $9 billion in reconstruction aid in the five years since the fall of the Taliban, but this is less than one third of the amount dedicated for reconstruction in Iraq, even though Afghanistan is a larger and more populous country with greater infrastructure needs.[70] To help break the dependence on opium, Afghanistan needs resources to build a government and economy robust enough to function without opium. To help achieve this objective, the U.S. should increase the amount of aid provided to Afghanistan to strengthen the Karzai government's law enforcement capability, judicial system, and border security. In addition, the U.S. should increase aid for rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure which has been devastated by decades of conflict and is currently inadequate to support an opium-free economy. Infrastructure for energy production, water systems, and roads need to be rebuilt and expanded to enable the country to be able to support true long-term alternate livelihoods for Afghan citizens currently dependent on the opium trade.

De-emphasize Opium Eradication

The U.S. should de-emphasize opium eradication efforts. U.S.-backed eradication efforts have been ineffective and have resulted in turning Afghans against the U.S and NATO forces. The Council on Foreign Relations, a U.S. think tank, warns, "Elimination of narcotics will take well over a decade, and crop eradication is a counterproductive way to start such a program."[71] While the process of eradication lends itself well to the use of metrics such as "acres eradicated," eradication without access to long-term alternate livelihoods is devastating

Afghan's poor farmers without addressing root causes. The U.S. should put less emphasis on eradication and focus more attention and resources on the other pillars of the counter-narcotics strategy.

Focus on Long-Term Alternative Livelihoods

The U.S. should focus on a longer-term solution to the opium problem that emphasizes true alternate livelihoods for the 2.9 million Afghan's that currently rely on the opium industry for income. William Byrd of the World Bank says: "Expectations about what can be accomplished in the short run must be kept reasonable. Overly inflated expectations inevitably lead to disappointments, which given the political sensitivity of narcotics, in turn, can lead to overreaction and policy mistakes."[72] The "alternative livelihoods" supported by the current U.S. strategy are too often short-term "cash-for-work" projects that do not provide a lasting incentive for farmers to give up opium cultivation. The U.S. should dedicate more resources to supporting an Afghan economy that provides long-term alternative livelihoods.

Aggressively Pursue Drug Kingpins and Corrupt Government Officials

The U.S. should aggressively pursue drug kingpins and corrupt government officials involved in Afghanistan's opium trade. While there have been a hand-full of successful prosecutions of high-level drug traffickers, including the recent extradition and conviction of Afghan heroin kingpin Baz Mohammad, the Afghan government has failed to do enough to go after drug kingpins and corrupt government officials.[73] Consequently, drug kingpins and corrupt officials have gained power within Afghanistan and are threatening to destroy the fabric of its government and society. Without aggressively pursuing kingpins and corrupt officials, the Afghan public will continue to lack confidence in their government. This lack of confidence, coupled with the slow pace of infrastructure improvements, security, and the rule of law, has created an environment that remains conducive for a thriving opium economy.

Explore the Possibility of Afghanistan Entering the Licit Opium Market

The U.S. should explore the possibility of assisting Afghanistan in joining other countries in the production of legal opiates. Selling opium for legal uses is by itself no answer to Afghanistan's opium problem due to the fact that the market for licit opium is simply too small. Afghanistan's 2006 opium crop alone is equivalent to five years of global morphine demand.[74] In addition, the current market price for opium used for medical purposes is only about 20 percent of the price of illicit opium. However, legal opium production is still worth exploring. The Senlis Council recommends a strictly supervised licensing system in Afghanistan for the

cultivation of opium for the production of essential opiate-based medicines such as morphine and codeine.[75] Such a licensing scheme is already being administered in Turkey, India, France, and Australia.[76] While cultivation for legal uses is not a "silver bullet" solution to Afghanistan's opium problem, it could eventually become a viable source of income for some farmers.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's history of violent conflict, weak central government, poor agricultural economy, rugged geography, and harsh climate are all factors contributing to the dramatic increase in opium cultivation and production since the toppling of the Taliban in 2001. The profitable characteristics of Afghanistan's opium economy, as well as the lack of negative consequences associated with opium trade and wide-spread government corruption, are fueling the opium economy and a resurgent Taliban and insurgency. The U.S. counter-narcotics strategy in Afghanistan has not been successful in countering these adverse trends. Consequently the following six broad recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the counter-narcotics strategy in Afghanistan are proposed: increase troop levels and eliminate national restrictions; substantially increase financial aid; de-emphasize opium eradication; focus on long-term alternative livelihoods; aggressively pursue drug kingpins and corrupt government officials; and explore the possibility of Afghanistan entering the licit opium market.

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